

# Social Issues in Art

## *Exploring Identity*

A guide for looking, talking, and taking action



## Our hope

We strongly believe that an in-person visit to the museum benefits students in myriad ways. Being in the galleries, seeing art up close, and being guided by a gallery teacher all foster a sense of wonder and an openness to consider and discuss difficult concepts. Perhaps you've already brought your students for a visit, or maybe scheduling a visit is not possible. In any case, we hope that this guide may serve you and your students in exploring issues of identity, community, and society through looking at, discussing, writing about, and making art.

The Blanton Museum of Art is pleased to offer Social Issues in Art. This series presents objects from the Blanton's collection that provide opportunities for students to discuss issues relevant to individuals, schools, communities, our nation, and our world.

## About this guide

The Theme: "Exploring Identity" offers educators the opportunity to explore themes related to personal identity, exploring similarities and differences among ourselves, feeling secure and safe in being true to who we are. Each work prompts students to discuss how things like skin color, a sense of belonging, and self-representation can affect both how we see ourselves, and how we perceive others.

### The Plan:

- Select a work to share with students. The title of each work is linked to the Blanton collections website that provides more information AND an image that can be expanded onscreen for projection in the classroom. Zoom in and out to allow students to look closely at the work as you lead students in discussion. (1-2 min.)
- Use the thinking routine (See, Think, Me, We) on the next page to help students make personal connections to the artwork and to each other. (5-10 min.)
- Select some (or all) of the suggested questions and prompts for follow-up activities of artmaking or research. (5-10 min.)

### The Resources:

- A thumbnail image
- Link to object label information (click on the title of the artwork to access curatorial comments about the artist and the art)
- Suggested discussion questions and follow-up activities
- A high resolution image (for providing photocopied images for classes)

## [Relevant TEKS, by grade level](#)

In addition, each page in this resource may include a gray box that highlights TEKS specifically addressed by the artwork.

## Our donors

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*This series is based on previous collaboration between the Blanton, the ADL, Austin ISD, and the Create Lab.*

# A Thinking Routine

## See, Think, Me, We\*

Lead students in a guided conversation using the following questions.

1. Look closely at the work. What do you notice? Make lots of observations.
2. What thoughts do you have about the work?
3. What connections can you make between you and the work?
4. How might the work be connected to bigger stories— about the world and our place in it?

This thinking routine invites learners to make personal connections, so it's especially important to establish an atmosphere of trust and care.

The SEE step encourages close looking. Ask learners to fully describe what they see, and to hold off making interpretations or giving opinions until the THINK step. If you like, deepen the SEE step by using a strategy or two from the [Viewing Moves](#), which offers several suggestions for looking closely at a work of art.

The THINK step encourages learners to share thoughts about the work. All thoughts are welcome, but you can give some direction to the step by asking questions such as: What's going on in the work? What might it mean? What makes you say that?

The ME step asks learners to make personal connections, so it's a moment when a safe and trusting atmosphere is especially important. You may want to model this step by sharing your own personal response first. If you're working with a large group, it can be helpful to do this step in pairs or trios.

By asking for 'bigger stories,' the WE step invites learners to reach for connections beyond themselves. One way to help them do this is to ask them to consider how the personal connections they identified in the ME step might connect to larger themes of human experience. This step can be challenging for students. As with the ME step, it can be helpful for you, the facilitator, to model a response by sharing your own reflections.

# Synecdoche

## Byron Kim, 1998

A skillful fusion of abstraction and representation in painting, *Synecdoche* is a powerful statement about identity. Arranged in a grid, these monochrome panels replicate the skin color of 20 people who Byron Kim encountered at random on The University of Texas at Austin campus.

*Synecdoche* is an ongoing series of more than 410 individual panels that Kim began in 1991 and has continued to the present day. Borrowed from literary criticism, the term “synecdoche” refers to a figure of speech in which a part represents a whole. Here the color of each panel stands in for the individual sitter, while all of the panels together represent the university population. Yet, Kim’s work reminds us how absurd it is to define human beings by their skin color alone.



## LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What colors do you see?
- What do you think this could represent? What makes you say that?

## LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with students.

- What is similar about each square?
- What is different?
- Which color is most like your own skin color?
- Have you ever been especially aware of your skin color? Why? What happened?
- Why is it important to notice our differences and our similarities?
- How might this work be empowering?

## MAKE

Create a “panel” for the skin tone of each student in the class and make a bulletin board.



Byron Kim, *Synecdoche*, 1998, 46 x 48 in., oil and wax on twenty panels. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Michener Acquisitions Fund, 1998.77.a-t

## *We Belong Here*

### Tavares Strachan, 2012

Bahamian-born artist Tavares Strachan offers a strong statement that invites us to think more about who we are, and where here might be. Strachan encourages viewers to ponder: “As humans, we all struggle with how we fit in and belong....Who gets to determine who belongs where? And where is here? And why does it matter?” Any change to the location or context of this work changes who “we” might be and where “here” is, bringing new nuances to the phrase.



“I have always been fascinated by invisibility,” he explains. Taking forgotten and excluded people and histories as his principal subjects, his art often uses light to make them visible. The welcoming tone struck by this phrase insinuates that perhaps many of us haven’t always felt included. “I wanted to make a work that everyone can own—one that everyone can have....Because as soon as you read it, you say, ‘We belong here,’ and we do belong.”

\*[TEKS connections](#) (US History Studies since 1877)

## LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What are your first impressions of this artwork?
- How does the work being in neon make it different than if it were a painting?

## LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with students.

- Who is “we?”
- What does it mean to “belong?”
- Where is “here?”
- Why do you think the artist felt he needed to make this work?
- How might this art be empowering?

## MAKE

Have students take “selfies” in five different locations where they feel they belong. Bring those photos back to class and have students share with others how/why they feel like they belong there.



Tavares Strachan, *We Belong Here*, 2012, 24 x 61 x 3/8 in., blue neon, two transformers. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Anthony Meier in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2014.34

# Skewered

## Deborah Roberts, 2017

Deborah Roberts' collages focus on eight to ten-year-old Black girls—subjects who rarely find themselves in the spotlight of art history. Often wearing polka dots or striped skirts and bows or barrettes in their hair, these knobby kneed pre-teenagers remind us of the vulnerable threshold age when kids—and especially girls—begin to possess a kind of self-consciousness that often devolves into insecurity, especially if they do not adhere to societal standards of beauty and behavior.

In *Skewered*, Roberts includes several details which ask viewers to consider their meaning: the bun at the top of the girl's hair, painted as a pile of matches; the sizes, shapes, and colors on the young girl's face; and the mismatched masks in each of her hands.



EXPLORING IDENTITY

## LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What do you see? What details or elements stand out to you?
- What's happening in this artwork?
- How do you feel when you look at this work?

## LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with students.

- What age might this person be? What makes you say that?
- How might the young person in this work feel?
- What might the artist be asking us to think about beauty?
- How could you help this person feel secure about who they are?
- Why might Roberts have chosen collage as the medium for this work?

## MAKE

Have students respond to some questions about their own identity before creating a collage depicting themselves. Consider:

- What stories about my experiences would I like to tell others, but I have not been able to?
- In what ways am I trying to be the best version of myself?
- What is most important to my own sense of identity (ethnicity, age, gender, language, economic status, etc.)?
- What joys and struggles do I want to communicate?

\*TEKS connections (US History Studies since 1877; Mexican American Studies; Economics with Emphasis on the Free Enterprise System and Its Benefits)





Deborah Roberts, *Skewered*, 2017, 44 x 32 in., collage, acrylic, and graphite on paper. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2017